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NEW YORK -- An Afghan the United States lists as one of the most-wanted drug kingpins in the world and alleges has close ties to the Taliban has been arrested and indicted on charges of conspiring to smuggle millions of dollars of heroin into the United States, federal investigators announced yesterday.

Bashir Noorzai was arrested Saturday by federal agents while traveling to New York City and was ordered held without bail yesterday for an alleged conspiracy to smuggle 1,100 pounds of heroin, worth about \$50 million, from Afghanistan and Pakistan into the United States and other countries over 14 years, US Attorney David Kelley said during a news conference. He did not spell out the exact circumstances of the capture of Noorzai, who could receive a life sentence if convicted.

"Afghanistan is the world's largest manufacturer and supplier of heroin, and Noorzai was certainly on the upper rung of that hierarchy," Kelley said.

According to the indictment, Noorzai, born in 1961, ran a criminal organization that harvested opium poppies in Afghanistan and processed the raw material into heroin and opium in Pakistan and Afghanistan from 1990 to 2004. Kelley said Noorzai maintained a "symbiotic relationship" with the Taliban, giving weapons and manpower to the Islamist militia that ruled Afghanistan for five years in return for protection of his drug-making and smuggling operations.

"In exchange, the Taliban allowed Noorzai's business to flourish," said Kelley. The Taliban ran Afghanistan from September 1996 until it was ousted in late 2001. Officials said Noorzai made his most recent shipment to New York City in 2002.

As evidence of that cooperation, federal officials cited an incident in 1997, when a truckload of morphine owned by Noorzai was seized by Taliban officials but returned to Noorzai with apologies from Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban leader deposed in the US-British invasion in 2001. Omar remains at large, and Taliban insurgents continue to operate in remote, mountainous regions of Afghanistan.

Officials said Noorzai met in 1990 with coconspirators in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, where he offered them heroin to distribute in New York. How much of the drug was involved in that deal was not specified, and the coconspirators are not named in the indictment.

Last year, Representative Mark Steven Kirk, Republican of Illinois, testified before the House International Relations Committee that Noorzai had strong ties to the Taliban as well as Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda was financing its operations from the sale of Noorzai's heroin in Pakistan, not with large foreign donations, he testified.

"It amounts to about \$28 million a year," Kirk said yesterday during a telephone interview. "Remember, Sept. 11 cost Al Qaeda only \$500,000, according to the 9/11 Commission."

Kirk, who has traveled to the region twice in the past two years on fact-finding missions, said he received much of his information from Mirwais Yasini, who formerly ran antidrug efforts in Afghanistan, on the first trip there. Kirk said in the interview that the money provides Al Qaeda with top military equipment and communications gear and that the terrorist network is trying to extend its drug selling to the West to reap higher profits, because 2 pounds of heroin sells for \$80,000 in New York City, compared with \$2,000 in Pakistan.

Kelley, the US attorney, declined to comment on the alleged Al Qaeda connection. "It's not something that's part of the case," he told reporters.

Elizabeth Jordan, a spokeswoman for the Drug Enforcement Administration, said in a telephone interview that her agency received many calls during the day about Kirk's past comments about Noorzai and Al Qaeda, but she said the office would not discuss them. "We are not talking about anything outside the indictment," she said.

In June 2004, President Bush identified Noorzai as one of the world's most wanted traffickers under the Drug Kingpin Act, prohibiting from making transactions with US financial institutions. It was not clear whether he had previously made such transactions.

A bearded Noorzai, 44, did not speak during his brief initial court appearance in Manhattan. His court-appointed attorney declined to comment outside the courtroom.

"Today's arrest . . . is a resounding victory for both Afghan and American citizens. We removed one of the world's top drug traffickers who orchestrated the smuggling of hundreds of kilograms of heroin into the United States and other countries, and for too long, devastated the country of Afghanistan," said Karen P. Tandy, the administrator of the DEA.

The State Department's report on international drug trafficking found that Afghanistan produces about 600 tons of heroin a year, more than 20 times the amount that comes from Burma, which ranks second. But the report also indicates that while some Afghan heroin reaches the United States, most is smuggled in from Colombia or Mexico. In 2000, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy estimated that 5 percent of the heroin in the United States originated in Afghanistan.

General Zaher Akbar, head of a US-funded unit of Afghan police working to destroy opium poppy fields, said Afghan authorities "appreciate the arrest of drug smugglers anywhere in the world, so long as there is proof against them and they are not just released the next day."